

22. Chesil Beach and The Fleet

Geographical Coordinates 50°36'N 2°32'W

Area 763ha

Location About 5km west of the town of Weymouth, in the county of Dorset, south-west England.

Date of Ramsar Designation 17 July 1985.

Other International Designations Special Protection Area under EC Directive 79/409.

National Designations Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI); Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty^P (AONB); Heritage Coast.

Principal Features Chesil Beach is a linear shingle storm beach, of international geomorphological importance, some 28km long and between 100m and 200m in width. On the landward side of the beach is a mostly shallow lagoon, known as The Fleet, which covers about 5km² at high tide. The Fleet varies in width from 75m to 900m and is open to the sea only at its eastern end, giving rise to strong gradients in tidal range and salinity (both decrease markedly to the west). The substrate of the lagoon is composed mostly of sand and silt and supports beds of *Zostera* and *Ruppia*, while the site also includes saltmarsh and reedbeds. The area is internationally important for wintering water birds*, notably *Branta bernicla bernicla* (2,251). Several other Anatidae winter in nationally important numbers e.g. *Cygnus olor* (982), *Anas penelope*, and *Mergus serrator* (236). The site is also nationally important for breeding birds, including *Sterna albifrons* (37 pairs in 1990). Distinctive invertebrate communities and the rare fish *Gobius couchii* are amongst other features of national importance. Parts of the site are managed by the Dorset Trust for Nature Conservation and by the National Trust. (1a,2a,2c,3b,3c)

*Both figures are average peak counts for the five winters 1987/88 to 1991/92.

Conservation Issues The Dorset coast is an important centre for tourism and recreation. The 1990 UK National Report noted that the local authority had produced an informal non-statutory management plan for part of the site, addressing conflicts between recreational activities and nature conservation priorities. The eastern part of the area is very close to the major port and town of Weymouth.